

TRADITIONS OF SPIRITUAL GUIDANCE

The Real Presence

A Quaker Perspective on Spiritual Direction

The contribution to this discussion by the Society of Friends is the more valuable because it has been made, not by thinkers along the lines of theology and psychology, but by disciples along the lines of experience. The Society of Friends has been a 'Holy Experiment' in spiritual guidance and has supplied abundant verification of its reality, and rich material for judging of the conditions which are necessary for its exercise.¹

THESE WORDS FROM THE ENGLISHMAN, William Charles Braithwaite, at the turn of the twentieth century in the Swarthmore Lecture at London Yearly Meeting (a British Quaker plenary gathering) goes far in setting the context for understanding the Quaker perspective on spiritual direction. In the first instance, Quakers would prefer the language of 'spiritual guidance' to the more authoritarian language of 'direction'. This preference stems from the Quaker understanding: all persons have spiritual worth in the eyes of God. This does not ignore the fact that some are spiritually more gifted in certain areas than others and, hence, more likely to be able to provide 'guidance'.

The second observation sees the foundational aspect of Quaker spirituality and, consequently, spiritual guidance, to be primarily *experiential*. For Quakers theology and doctrine are secondary to the primary experience of God and God's work in us. This observation leads explicitly to the title of the essay, namely, Quakers understand spiritual guidance in sacramental terms. 'For where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in the midst of them' (Mt 18:20). This text is the *locus classicus* of the Quaker understanding of the 'real presence' and how that is manifested in spiritual guidance.

This sense of 'gathering' lies at the heart of the Quaker experience of worship as well as spiritual guidance. In this gathering the divine Spirit comes to be present – sacramentally, there is a *real* presence. Indeed, the gathering itself – the two or three – is the real presence; this is the incarnational extension of God's continuing, graceful revelation. One has a sense for this when we hear the words of seventeenth-century Quaker apologist, Robert Barclay.

The divine strength that is communicated by meeting together . . . and by waiting in silence upon God is very evident. Sometimes a person will come in who has not been vigilant and whose mind is restless, or who comes in suddenly from the rush of worldly business and therefore is not

gathered with the rest. As soon as he retires inwardly, the power which has already been raised in good measure by the whole meeting will suddenly lay hold upon his spirit. In a wonderful way it will help to raise up the good in him and will give birth to a sense of the same power. It will melt and warm his heart in the same way that a man who is cold feels warmth when he approaches a stove, or a flame takes hold in some small combustible material that is nearby.²

This is a doctrinal statement to be sure – but, more importantly for Quakers, it is an experiential knowing. In a contemporary way the novelist J. D. Salinger in *Franny and Zooey* captures this sense of real presence.

‘But most of all, above everything else, who in the Bible besides Jesus knew – *knew* – that we’re carrying the Kingdom of Heaven around with us, *inside*, where we’re too goddam stupid and sentimental and unimaginative to look?’³

Quaker spirituality affirms that we all have this kingdom of heaven within. This is a universal human phenomenon because of God’s creative act. Indeed, the ministry of Quakerism can be summed up in the well-known words of George Fox, seventeenth-century founder of the movement. In his *Journal* Fox admonishes those who know God that ‘you will come to walk cheerfully over the world, answering that of God in every one . . .’⁴

These words from George Fox provide the final observation to be noted. The key theological assumption for Quakers offering spiritual guidance is ‘there is that of God within every one’. Concretely, this provides the spiritual guide with an optimistic basis from which to operate. God has already been creative in providing every human with ‘divine access’. The guide’s opportunity is to be present to help the other make the ‘connection’ with God and, then, to live more deeply and abundantly in that connection.

In Quaker language spiritual guidance is the process of assisting another to be in touch with that of God (waiting), listening to what that divine ‘voice’ would say (watching), and, finally, obeying the direction God would have that person move (walking). This essay uses these three aspects to chart the process of spiritual guidance as Quakers understand and practise it – waiting, watching and walking. For each of these three aspects of the process there are four characteristics: posture, discipline, mood and result. When this process of spiritual guidance effectively leads a person, he or she will come to that purity of heart – as described by Kierkegaard – or will be ‘centred’, as Quakers would designate it. To be centred is to be brought off the world’s ways by knowing and following God’s way.

Waiting

The Quaker spiritual guide begins optimistically with the assumption that the other has ‘that of God within’ – often called the ‘Light within’ or ‘the inward

Christ'. The first aspect of spiritual guidance is *waiting* for the Light. The twentieth-century Quaker genius, Thomas Kelly, opens his devotional classic, *A testament of devotion*, with these words:

Deep within us all there is an amazing inner sanctuary of the soul, a holy place, a Divine Center, a speaking Voice, to which we may continuously return. Eternity is at our hearts, pressing upon our time-torn lives, warming us with intimations of an astounding destiny, calling us home unto Itself.⁵

Spiritual guidance begins in waiting – waiting because most people are so busily living lives unaware of this amazing inner sanctuary. The spiritual guide helps another interrupt busyness and dizziness in order to find this inner treasure. In a paradoxical sense the first word of the spiritual guide is 'stop!'

This spiritual advice resonates with contemporary feminist knowings. In *Women at the well* Kathleen Fischer says 'the first step in spiritual direction . . . is helping a woman notice key experiences and bring them to speech. Its goal is discovery and awareness.'⁶ 'Waiting' is exactly about discovery and awareness. The posture of waiting is self-evident – but important. As Quakers understand it, waiting is waiting – this is radically different from inactivity. As the spiritual guide helps the other to wait, what she or he does is assist the other to a place of discovery and awareness. Usually, this means to stop being or doing what normally characterizes us so that God can enter our picture. This posture is a person attentive for what will come. This posture is *openness*. This posture is really a form of prayer.

Quakers have a number of ways of talking about prayer in this sense of 'waiting'. However, it is also instructive to see how the Quaker perspective aligns itself with much of contemporary spirituality. For example, in *Exploring spiritual direction* Alan Jones quotes an unpublished work of Richard Norris which describes prayer as a form of concentration. 'Prayer is a situation in which a person is *con-centrated* upon, pulled together in utter attentiveness to, the "other".'⁷ Waiting is this prayerful concentration. Quakers understand this as a process of 'centring', of coming to the discovery and awareness of that of God within. Braithwaite observes 'truth was perceived with the help of the retirement of soul and waiting upon the Lord'.⁸ Key to this 'centring' is silence – that hush before the divinity. As waiting is not inactivity, Quakers do not employ silence for its own sake, but rather because it is instrumental – it is the 'space' humans make for God's voice.

In addition to a posture of waiting there is a discipline in waiting. The discipline is *patience*. Patience as a discipline of waiting gives the temporal dimension to the space of openness. Madame Guyon, another seventeenth-century spiritual genius, is wonderfully similar to George Fox when she prays: 'And yet – oh, Child Almighty, Uncreated Love, Silent and All-containing Word – it is really up to You to make Yourself loved, enjoyed and understood'.⁹ The spiritual guide enjoins the other to be patient so that this Word will be spoken and come to be loved, understood and enjoyed.

Waiting also has its particular mood. The mood is *expectancy*. If waiting were inactivity, there would be no expectancy. But Quaker spiritual guidance proceeds with the assumption that God will speak, that we will come to know first-hand the divinity and the divine will. Our waiting is the expectancy for this continual birthing process. Spiritual guidance cultivates this expectancy – what Kelly calls

the secret of a deeper devotion, a more subterranean sanctuary of the soul, where the Light Within never fades, but burns, a perpetual Flame, where the wells of living water of divine revelation rise up continuously, day by day and hour by hour, steady and transfiguring.¹⁰

Finally, expectancy brings its birthing, its result. The result of waiting is that *it happens*. 'It' means the Light within dawns in our discovery and becomes present in our awareness. Into our openness comes that divine Voice. Our spiritual eye is given morning light to see. Our spiritual ear is given waves to connect with this divine Sound. It happens. The waiting is finished. With light to see, spiritual guidance now moves the other to the second phase: watching.

Watching

Watching is a further step to engage the God who is giving sight and sound, who is letting us touch, feel and know the divine presence. Once more, Robert Barclay gives the Quaker words to this focused attention – attention beyond waiting. Although Barclay's words are descriptive of worship, they are also applicable to spiritual guidance.

From this principle of being silent and not doing God's work until actuated by God's light and grace in the heart, the manner of sitting together and waiting upon the Lord together came about naturally . . . each one made it his work to retire inwardly to the measure of grace in himself, not only being silent in words but even abstaining from all of his own thoughts, mental images, and desires. Thus watching in holy dependence upon the Lord . . . it is his power and virtue that they thereby come to enjoy.¹¹

If waiting enables us to discover that my life as 'story' proceeds more meaningfully with God, then watching is the process of coming to learn my story with God in it.

Watching assumes a different posture from waiting. The posture of watching is *attentiveness*. The spiritual guide helps the other 'pay attention'. In contemporary expression Alan Jones says 'the friend of my soul keeps the other constantly in focus. Indeed, he or she is the sign of the otherness which I need if I am to be released from the cell of my own sweating self.'¹² This posture of attentiveness enables me to keep focused on God, literally, to be 'in tension' with that divine presence. This is the spiritual language of connection. Connection suggests the requisite discipline of watching.

This discipline of watching is *courage*. It takes courage to ‘hang in there’. Learning how our story is connected with God’s desire for us takes courage. Spiritual guidance helps us know that we are not God – and helps us wait for and, then, watch who God turns out to be. Idolatry does not take courage; discipleship does. It is nothing less than a call to the simplified life, to spiritual maturity. Kelly eloquently says watching for God is

the beginning of spiritual maturity, which comes after the awkward age of religious busyness for the Kingdom of God – yet how many are caught, and arrested in development, with this adolescent development of the soul’s growth. The maker of this simplified life is radiant joy. It lives in the Fellowship of the Transfigured Face.¹³

These words for the stage of watching are words of hope – words demanding courage that we can grow into the radiant joy. But, this clearly marks a change in moods.

At the watching stage the mood shifts from expectancy to *excitement*. Because it is happening, we are excited. There is a vibrancy and vitality because the movement is discernible, the concentrated prayer is yielding us its concrete results. The fresh winds of the divine Spirit are blowing and we know it. In my own work on Quaker spirituality I affirmed:

. . . the Spirit moves freshly within and one can feel it, know it and obey it. With this image comes a sense of energy and dynamism. In fact, spiritual stagnation or stasis is not possible. The call of God is a call to be pilgrim, to be on a journey, to move. The Spirit and the Spirit’s guide offers a sense of direction, but one must move.¹⁴

The mood of excitement is present because of the movement of God’s Spirit within. And the excitement is already pointing to the result.

The result of watching is that we learn that our story in God’s presence is really a call – a call to move, to become a *pilgrim* on the journey with the divine presence. This journey is described by the seventeenth-century Quaker mystic, Isaac Pennington, with these tender words:

Now to the soul that hath felt breathings towards the Lord . . . and in whom there are yet any true breathings left after his living presence . . . I have this to say: Where art thou? Art thou in thy soul’s rest? Dost thou feel the virtue and power of the gospel? . . . And dost thou feel the life and power flowing in upon thee from the free fountain? . . . The gospel-state is a state of substance, a state of enjoying life, a state of feeling the presence and power of the Lord in his pure Holy Spirit . . . It begins in a sweet powerful touch of life, and there is a growth in the life.¹⁵

The spiritual guide, then, is one who commences the journey with us, joins us as one of the pilgrim people walking and living in the gospel-state. Watching for

the Light brings God into our story and this, in turn, brings us into the gospel-state. And perceptibly, the watching puts one in movement and this commences the third phase of spiritual guidance: walking.

Walking

Earlier, reference was made to the classic passage in Fox's journal which Quakers traditionally use to understand ministry and spiritual guidance.

And this is the word of the Lord God to you all, and a charge to you all in the presence of the living God, be patterns, be examples in all countries, places, islands, nations, wherever you come; that your carriage and life may preach among all sorts of people, and to them. Then you will come to walk cheerfully over the world, answering that of God in every one; whereby in them ye may be a blessing . . . Then to you the Lord God will be a sweet savour and a blessing.¹⁶

These words articulate the dynamism of the third phase of spiritual guidance, namely, walking in the Light. Indeed, Fox would have everyone walking cheerfully – able to share the story they have discovered and learned. This means through spiritual guidance the other now is able to 'live' his or her story. As Nemeck and Coombs put it, 'the lived experience is an irrefutable criterion. Ultimately, the authenticity of any direction is proven by living it out.'¹⁷

The posture of walking is self-evident. Through spiritual guidance one enables the other to arise and move – to walk on into her or his life accompanied by God. Indeed, the posture is closely linked to the discipline of walking. The discipline is now one of *urgency*. Whereas spiritual guidance commences with a sense of expectation, walking always leads to a sense of urgency. As one is guided by God, there arises an urgency to get on with God.

This urgency is sustained by continuing in prayer – staying 'in touch' with the voice who guides. In a contemporary way Alan Jones elaborates:

Prayer is an adventurous descent into that mind (of Christ) where, by the power of the Holy Spirit, our self-consciousness is transfigured into Christ-consciousness. It is inevitably a way of sacrifice and self-surrender . . . It is a creative way of poverty, chastity, and obedience – poverty because it means being truly poor before God; chastity, because it involves a single-minded devotion to him; obedience because our single-minded attention will be manifested in specific acts of love.¹⁸

Quakers would feel comfortable with the sentiments of these words. There is a favourite phrase Quakers employ to describe what Jones has called 'prayer as continuation' and that is: 'mind the Light'.

To mind the Light brings the one guided into a place of poverty, chastity and obedience. The guide helps the other simplify her or his life (poverty). Thomas Kelly suggests simplifying life is an inner problem not an external problem.

Life is meant to be lived from a Center, a divine Center . . . There is a divine Abyss within us all, a holy Infinite Center, a Heart, a Life who speaks in us . . . But too many of us have heeded the Voice only at times. Only at times have we submitted to His holy guidance. We have not counted this Holy Thing within us to be the most precious thing in the world.¹⁹

The Quaker spiritual guide assists the other to be centred and to live 'centred' – and that will be a simple life.

At the same time a centred life will be a 'pure life' (chastity). The pure life comes from minding the Light. And this pure life leads naturally and easily to an obedient life. The obedient life is the one being lived attentively to the Spirit and 'walking in the newness of life', as Paul puts it. The Peace Pilgrim says it in a Quaker way.

For light I go directly to the Source of light, not to any of the reflections. Also I make it possible for more light to come to me by living up to the highest light I have. *You cannot mistake light coming from the Source, for it comes with complete understanding so that you can explain it and discuss it.*²⁰

There is no doubt from the words of Peace Pilgrim that the dominant mood from the centred life is *joy*. Walking in the Light leads to enjoyment.

Finally, in a mood of joy the one being guided gets results – *homecoming*. The spiritual guide is really one who assists another on their journey home – home to God, the Source of the voice who calls us and walks with us. The Quaker perspective on spiritual direction is always an experience of 're-union'. The guide is someone who experientially knows something about the journey and is herself or himself willing to assist another to discover and develop their own capacity to know and love the God who is calling them home.

Quakers know that when guidance no longer is offered nor practised, the energy and vigour of spirituality ebbs. In the words of Braithwaite, too often 'we prefer the security of stagnation to the dangers and glory of vigorous life'.²¹ Spiritual guidance is a way out – away from the stagnations of life. And it is a way in – into the abundance of life promised by God. As Quakers understand it, spiritual guidance is a sacramental undertaking – when two or more people gather in the expectation that the living Christ will be in their midst – a real presence.

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NOTES

- ¹ William C. Braithwaite: *Spiritual guidance in Quaker experience* (London: Headley Brothers, 1990), p 13.
- ² Dean Freiday (ed): *Barclay's apology, in modern English* (Elberton NJ: Dean Freiday, 1967), pp 252-253.
- ³ J. D. Salinger, *Fanny and Zoey* (New York: Bantam Books, 1962), p 171.
- ⁴ John L. Nickalls (ed): *The journal of George Fox* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1952), p 263. Hereafter cited as Fox.
- ⁵ Thomas R. Kelly, *A testament of devotion* (New York: Harper & Row, 1941), p 29.
- ⁶ Kathleen Fischer, *Women at the well: feminist perspectives on spiritual direction* (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), p 9.
- ⁷ Alan Jones, *Exploring spiritual direction: an essay on Christian friendship* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1982), p 106.
- ⁸ Braithwaite, p 44.
- ⁹ Jeanne Guyon, *Experiencing the depths of Jesus Christ* (Auburn ME: Seed Sowers Christian Books, 1975), pp xii-xiii.
- ¹⁰ Kelly, p 31.
- ¹¹ Barclay, p 250.
- ¹² Jones, p 107.
- ¹³ Kelly, p 73.
- ¹⁴ Alan Kolp, *Fresh winds of the Spirit* (Richmond IN: Friends United Press, 1991), p 129.
- ¹⁵ Isaac Pennington, 'Some directions to the panting soul', *The selected works of Isaac Pennington*, fourth edition, vol 2 (Sherwoods NY: David Heston, 1962), pp 219-220.
- ¹⁶ Fox, p 263.
- ¹⁷ Francis Kelly Nemeck and Maria Theresa Coombs, *The way of spiritual direction* (Wilmington DE: Michael Glazier, 1985), p 116.
- ¹⁸ Jones, p 68.
- ¹⁹ Kelly, p 116.
- ²⁰ Compiled by friends, *Peace pilgrim: her life and work in her own words* (Santa Fe NM: Ocean Tree Book, 1983), p 127.
- ²¹ Braithwaite, p 74.